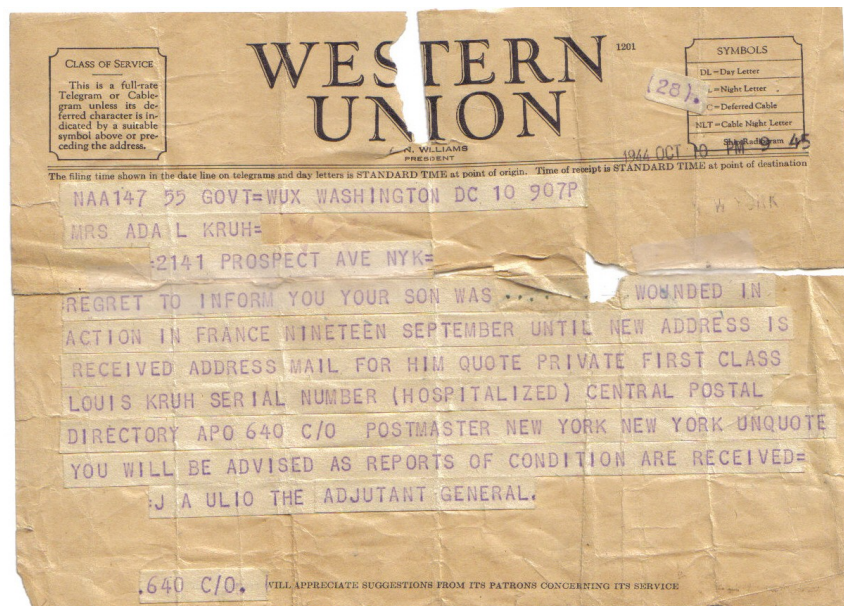


As often as I asked, Dad never talked about his service in Europe during the Second World War. This despite frequent attempts by my sister and I to get him to talk about his war-time experience. Imagine kids actually begging their father to tell his war stories! But we never got them, only a shrug or something evasive like “well, I just did what a lot of us had to do” or, even more cryptically, “it was rough.”

A Vietnam veteran once said, to me, “the guys who talk the most about their time on the front lines usually turn out to be rear-echelon desk jockeys. If you’ve been “in the shit” the last thing you do is talk about it. You want to forget it.”

He was able to write about it, though, as he did for our hometown paper on the 60th anniversary of the end of the war. In the piece he describes how a 21 year-old kid from the Bronx ended up with the 94th Infantry Division in Lorient, France on September 19, 1944, firing rifle grenades at Nazi forces protecting a submarine base.

“After a few hours,” he wrote in Merrick Life in August of 2005, “our supply of grenades was running low and, during a lull, our sergeant asked for a volunteer to go back to the headquarters area for more grenades. For some reason I raised my hand, possibly thinking I might escape the incessant bombing for a few minutes. The sergeant yelled ‘Go’ and I began running to the supply depot when the shelling started again. I jumped into a foxhole... heard a shell explode, saw a very bright light and woke up the following day in a hospital.”



The army sent this telegram to my grandparents informing them of dad's injury. My grandfather Jack' didn't want his wife, Ada, to know the extent of his wounds. You can see he erased the word “seriously” from the first line of the telegram. I once asked them both if grandma ever said anything about the obvious gap. They just shook their heads and waved me off. Decades later it was obvious both could still remember the fear they had that day.

Dad was given the Purple Heart and the Bronze Star for his actions that day, but the medals sat in their original boxes in his desk drawer, unopened, for years. The closest he ever came to talking about the war was in 1998. We were in a car and passed a billboard advertising the recently released Tom Hanks movie *Saving Private Ryan*. My dad pointed in the direction of the billboard and asked “Have you seen it?”

“No, not yet,” I replied. “Have you?”

“Yes.”

“I’m told the battle scenes are very realistic.”

Then, my dad got quiet and a palpable silence filled the car. It was eerie. I waited for the answer but... he said nothing. I turned and saw the grimmest look I’d ever seen on his face. After a few moments, he finally spoke.

“Yes, they are.”

In those three words – or rather, the way in which he spoke them – my father told me more than he ever had about his war experience and why it changed him. And I understood how right my Vietnam-veteran friend had been.



This picture of my dad was taken before World War II. He’s on the roof of his parent’s apartment in the Bronx playing his drums with beautiful, joyous abandon. He’s into the beat and the music: his head is tilted back and his eyes are closed in musical rapture. It’s always been my favorite picture of him, perhaps because I never ever saw that look on his face in person. I always assumed it was the war. With the article he wrote for my hometown paper and those three words in the car that day I was finally able to understand – as much as a fortunate son who never served, could – about what he endured.

America has November 11th, Veteran's Day, to honor the men and women who served in the armed forces. We also have May 30th, Memorial Day, to remember those who gave their lives for our country. As many families do, we have another, very personal day for remembrance and thanks; September 19th, the day the world changed for a boy who never again would play drums on his Bronx rooftop with such abandon.